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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes two joint sessions held by the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force and the National Advisory Council on Indian Education to hear testimony on health and substance abuse prevention issues relevant to Native American children. Issues and problems fell into the following areas: (1) general health and wellness, including the need for culturally relevant programs to address issues of substance abuse and health, and Native traditional approaches to counseling; (2) prenatal and infant health, including failure of infants to thrive and fetal alcohol syndrome; (3) substance abuse prevention, including the emotional needs of students from alcohol abusing families and the growing problem of inhalant abuse; and (4) suicide prevention. For each area, recommendations for action are made, and programs and strategies that work are described. Many of these programs are cooperative efforts between schools and tribal communities and involve such strategies as: (1) leadership training for students who then start community service projects; (2) a student and adult running club; (3) traditional approaches to prenatal care and maternal education; (4) Navajo drug and alcohol programs linked to traditional healing practices and concepts of balance and order in one's life; (5) community funding of special events as incentives for improved school performances; and (6) student peer counseling. (SV)

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INAR/NACIE Joint Issues Sessions
NIEA 22nd Annual Conference - San Diego, California
October 15, 1990

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"Health, Wellness, and Substance Abuse Prevention"

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INAR/NACIE - Joint Issues Sessions
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Summary: "Health, Wellness, and Substance Abuse Prevention"

The first session on Health, Wellness, and Substance Abuse Prevention was co-hosted by INAR Task Force member David L. Beaulieu and NACIE Council member Andrea Barlow. The second session on these issues was co-hosted by INAR Task Force member Bob Martin and NACIE Council member Marie Cox. The following issues, recommendations and exemplary programs were discussed:

I. General Health and Wellness

Recommendations

- Every Indian nation must assume control over its own education systems. Then tribal people can institute culturally-relevant programs on a K through 12 basis that address substance abuse and other health issues, and actually hope to see tangible results within a generation.

- We do a disservice to our people when we always stress the families that are dysfunctional and abuse alcohol. We need to also give credit to those families who do raise their children well and are providing support for their education and personal growth.

- Children and youth are not receptive to educators' messages about health and substance abuse prevention when they get conflicting and contrary images from TV, advertising, and the adult behavior they see in their communities. Arguments that try to instill fear of health jeopardy as the consequences of drug and alcohol use, simply do not work. We need to speak to the issues that are most important to the kids we work with. Teens are mostly anxious about being unacceptable or unattractive so we must focus our messages on these issues.

- When non-Indian school personnel are trying to deliver health services to teens and encounter cultural barriers, they are advised to seek assistance through Indian Health Service community health representatives who know the culture and language of the youth and family being served.

- Some Indian people with unhealthy ways of thinking (many are alcoholics themselves) try to hide behind "traditional ways," when we introduce programs to address problems like children of alcoholics or physical abuse. We have to be clear about the real meaning of traditional ways and values versus unhealthy responses to life problems.

- Some tribes use public ridicule as a way of influencing people who have serious problems. In majority society this is considered uncourteous, but is it better to call in the police and hope they can find evidence which might put the offender in jail? The traditional approach is founded in the belief that you sometimes have to put people down before you can lift them up and this is seen by tribal members as a more effective solution.

- There are sometimes differences between Native traditional approaches to counseling and what is viewed as good practice by the majority culture. For instance, majority culture stresses giving praise while traditional culture assumes that people know when they are doing well and need to be advised only about the things they still need to learn.

- Because there are so many health related problems, whether you work on the reservation or in an urban setting, it is essential to draw on all of the available resources--parents, teachers, social service workers, clinic services, and tribal medicine people--in order to have a meaningful impact. It is especially important to have a networking system that includes those who know and understand the ways of indigenous people in the area you serve. Traditional medicine is a teaching mechanism and it needs to be available as a choice.

Programs and Strategies that Work

- Window Rock High School in Arizona has selected and trained teachers to conduct small group peer counseling sessions on a weekly basis for students who want to discuss issues of personal importance. Staff training includes coverage of issues such as substance abuse prevention, working with children of alcoholics, and suicide prevention. Sessions take place during the regular school day so students are excused from class and teachers each use their prep period one day a week to facilitate. When things come up that are beyond the skill of the teacher-facilitator, they can make referrals to local social services. Wherever possible, family-based problems are addressed through social service-based family counseling. This has been so successful that soon almost all teachers in the high school will have been trained to conduct these counseling groups.

- Claremore, OK, has organized a Running Club and gathers Indians students together 2 or 3 times a week for practice, and on Saturday mornings to participate in runs held throughout Oklahoma. This program was originally connected to the Indian Health Care Resource Center in Tulsa, OK, but has become so successful that it is now an independently incorporated group. Participation is primarily for youth and children, but adults and parents are also encouraged to join.

- In Tucson, AZ, the Indian Student Advisor works with school counselors and with the "student resource (police) officer" (SRO) to identify students involved in gang activities and bring all other available school and community resources to bear in an effort to successfully intervene and reduce the level of gang membership and violence. They also have held staff awareness workshops for teachers and administrators on gang activities. Young people (mostly boys) tend to join gangs when they are unhappy in school, getting poor grades, and unhappy at home. The gang does not ask why you are getting low grades, they accept you as you are.

- The Futures Through Leadership Program (a subsidiary within Futures for Children) in Albuquerque, NM works with youth for a year-long training program. Students are brought into Albuquerque and provided training in leadership skills including communication, self-help, problem solving, and public speaking. Then they go back to their home communities and work with a mentor to start community service projects based on their own concerns. Projects have included establishing SADD groups, community clean-up, and community libraries. The program is very successful because it enhances students' leadership skills, builds their self-esteem, and allows them to give back to their communities in ways that make things better for everyone.

II. Prenatal and Infant Health

Issues and Problems

- According to one doctor with the Arizona Indian Health Service, Indian babies are strong and very healthy when they are born, and after about six weeks, they begin to lose weight and show signs of poor health. This could be attributed in part to economic factors, but other health-related issues also contribute.

- Because of widespread alcoholism, an increasing number of Indian babies are being born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and are handicapped from birth. Then they are not properly cared for in infancy which further complicates their problems.

- Problems with alcoholism have been around for a long time, but today they seem worse and we have added new problems like AIDS and the effects of cocaine and crack. Crack babies are particularly hard to deal with, even as infants, because they cry all the time, hardly sleep, and grow up to be emotionally disturbed. Some of these children are now entering preschool and are creating problems for teachers who have a very hard time controlling them in the classroom.

Recommendations

- Good family planning should be encouraged for Native American families.

- Prenatal care and education are essential for young women expecting their first child.

- Traditional ways emphasize caring for your mind, taking care of your hygiene, and proper eating and exercise--all within the context of having respect for the gift the Creator is giving us through this womanhood, the doorway into the spirit world. School and health systems must allow us to share this concept even though it does not fit any of their structured guidelines.

- Traditional ways in some tribes suggest that young expectant mothers would seek instruction from their mothers' sisters and cousins. This instruction is considered sacred and private, and because reprimands are given through the aunt or cousin, this way preserves the close bond between the mother and daughter.

- Tribes have an inherent right to self-government. The new grant system that is currently being tried should allow tribes to take action on behalf of their own people even when such action might be interpreted as being in violation of the Civil Rights Act. For instance, one tribe tried to pass a law four years ago that would enable them to intervene with a pregnant girl who is known to be a substance abuser (by placing her in a treatment facility--with or without her consent) in order to protect the fetus. They were not allowed to do so because it was ruled to be a violation of the mother's rights.

Programs and Strategies that Work

- In some parts of Alaska, the Alaska Native Sisterhood provides ongoing prenatal support to young expectant mothers.

- Parents Anonymous programs can be helpful in providing education to young parents about how to be good parents, including nurturing skills, teaching children about values, behavior

management, and the difference between punishment and discipline. This kind of program should be more widely available.

III. Substance Abuse Prevention

Issues and Problems

- Many of the problems Indian children are having in schools are related to the fact that they come from alcoholic homes. Increasingly schools have to meet the emotional needs of students as well as their academic needs.

- Inhalant abuse is becoming a widely prevalent health problem among Native American youth according to a representative from Western Behavioral Studies. In fact, while use of almost all other drugs is decreasing, use of inhalants is on the rise and almost at epidemic proportions on some reservations. Inhalants are popular because they are cheap and very accessible, more than most other substances. Popular inhalants include spray paint, gasoline, canned heat, and Lysol mixed with other substances. The resources to deal with inhalant abuse are extremely limited and there is not a single treatment center in the country that specializes in this area. Inhalant abusers have some very unique problems. Some of the solvents kids are using contain more than 100 different chemicals with complex interactions that, over a long period of time, can lead to severe brain damage and even death. Thirty days--the average time for other types of detoxication treatment--doesn't even begin to detox an inhalant abuser who may need treatment for up to a year. We need to establish a treatment center to treat kids with these problems, and we need to provide better education about the harmful effects of inhalants.

- The Great Sioux Nation is concerned that schools serving the 15 tribes in its tri-state Midwest area are unable to deal with the increased number of kids who enter school with psychotic behaviors that are related to drug and alcohol use. There are no institutions to serve these kids in the Midwest area. Some of them come in from out-of-state institutions with medication that schools do not know how to administer. They disrupt the entire school.

- Alcohol and drug abuse needs to be addressed in Bureau schools as well as the public schools. It is like having an "elephant in the living room." It is there and everyone knows about it, but we need to enforce the regulations and do something to address the problems. Use of drugs and alcohol adversely affects students' health, grades, and attendance.

Recommendations

- We are going to have to heal ourselves from within, and the best initial prevention measures we can take include the following:

  * We must demand that our leaders initiate programs to address this issue and begin by asking tribal council members to serve as role models.

  * The community leaders who serve in tribal judicial systems, law systems, enforcement systems, and sit on tribal committees are going to have to sober up and start working together.

* Once programs are in place, tribal councils must pass laws that require whole families to get counseling and substance abuse prevention services when one of their family members are picked-up for abuse problems.

- We need more teacher training to help teachers identify and address the emotional needs of children of alcoholics. Also school climate needs to become more traditional to better reflect the values of the community and to promote students' emotional growth. Support groups are an important and useful strategy in providing needed emotional support and may be far more beneficial than remedial academic programs.

- We must provide education on the effects of alcohol abuse and on health and wellness for our children while they are still in grade school--preferably beginning in the first grade and continuing up through high school.

- It is important to stress the need for some of our traditional ways to be brought into programs that address the problems of alcohol and substance abuse. Treatment centers need to be educated to permit members of the community to become involved in treatment from a traditional perspective, even though it may not fit their guidelines.

Programs and Strategies that Work

- The Navajo tribe has received a grant for drug and alcohol programs that are linked to traditional healing practices. The programs are based on the fundamental concept of achieving balance and order in one's life. Balance involves four areas: (1) prayer and spirituality which come from learning traditional values, (2) self-esteem coming from skills and being able to provide for one's self and one's family, (3) maintaining social wellness and being able to get along with other people and with your community, and (4) maintaining a relationship with one's physical environment. The concept of order is related to respecting and honoring the traditional hierarchy between Elders and parents and youth. The tribe has developed a K through 12 curriculum based on these principles for use in the public schools and the BIA boarding school, and provides awareness training for parents, teachers, and health professionals. The response has been very, very positive.

- Chemawa Alcoholism Education Center at Chemawa Indian School in Oregon provides intervention services to students who are written-up for substance abuse violations. Intervention is coordinated by an inter-disciplinary team which includes residential, academic, counseling, and drug and alcohol staff. The violation and related issues are discussed by the team and the student, an assessment is completed to identify the level of the problem, and treatment is prescribed. If the student is chemically dependent, he or she is referred to treatment, or can choose to go home and get outside treatment before coming back to Chemawa. The program is strongly linked to rehabilitation aftercare (RAC) staff in the students' home communities. These people provided summer support services and verify sobriety prior to beginning of Fall semester. In four years since the program began, violations have dropped from 1300 to 630. Out of ten students that were sent home because they refused treatment services, eight got into treatment at home and returned to Chemawa.

- Futures for Children is a nonprofit organization that serves Native Americans from the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Tsiamshian tribes, and works with communities to help them address their own needs--which often include substance abuse prevention. For adults in communities, the Futures for Children board has distributed a booklet entitled Protecting Youth from Alcohol and Substance Abuse, available from the Native American Development Corp., Washington, D.C.. The key to Futures for Children's success has been involving community

members in generating ideas for addressing their own problems and then recommending appropriate resources.

- Bristol Bay Health Corporation in Alaska represents 26 villages spread over a vast area. To encourage curriculum development related to substance abuse, the Health Corporation has drawn up graphs for each village to portray the incidence of alcohol/drug-related deaths and suicides. The results are startling and have motivated schools and their students to take action. Students have been especially involved in developing strategies for persuading their older brothers and sisters against using snow machines, boats, airplanes, etc., while consuming alcohol.

- In Juneau, AK, the Native Parent Committee has developed support activities by raising money to fund special events as incentives for improved school performance. This is important because in small communities throughout Southeast Alaska there isn't much to do in the evenings or on weekends. The committee is also currently working on attendance and has learned that alcohol and drug abuse is a key contributor to high absenteeism. They have learned that parents are not that concerned about their students' attendance records, so they have implemented a home-school counseling strategy to enlist the parental help in getting their children to school on a regular basis. By identifying the problem at an early age, they feel they can have a more successful impact than if the problems are left until middle school or high school.

- In Chinle, AZ, the school has introduced a Peer Helper Program where students are trained through a counselor to listen to other students and help them deal with their problems. The first year activities were offered within a club format, but this year they have been changed into classes. If problems are too serious, the peer helpers refer them to the school counselor. This approach has been very effective in preventing suicide and helping kids who have problems at home. The Peer Helper Program is also linked to the Community Action Through Children and Youth Program (CACY) where students are involved in community service projects of their own design. Many students are involved in drugs and alcohol because they have nothing else to do in the small communities where they live, so community service projects meet this need with a positive alternative. Also the Student Council is involved in setting up Red Ribbon Week and Substance Abuse Week where the entire community is drawn in to participate in conferences and workshops.

- To counter problems of stereotypical images of "the drunken Indian," one program tries to empower its youth to challenge those kinds of stereotypes and to speak-up when people make disparaging and prejudicial remarks by countering them with positive statements. For instance, when one student said he didn't know one Indian who was sober, the counselor challenged him by offering to name 10 sober Indians for every one he could name who was a drinking person.

IV. Suicide Prevention

Issues and Problems

- Younger and older people who commit suicide do so because they don't see any future ahead of them and see no reason to live. All of the problems we are experiencing, whether it is alcoholism, drug abuse, suicide, sexual abuse, or others go back to the dysfunction of our communities and our tribes.

Recommendations

- When a student mentions suicide, they should be taken seriously, even though they may appear to be joking. Counselors recommend asking them directly if they are serious and if they have a plan, or how they think they might do it. This will get them to talk more about what they are really thinking and then the counselor can either work with them or refer them for outside help.

- Caution is urged against glamorizing a suicide either through media coverage or by symbolic gestures (like setting aside an empty chair draped with a Pendleton blanket at graduation for that student), since this might trigger other suicides.

Programs and Strategies that Work

- To address problems of suicide or teen death "epidemics," Window Rock High School held an assembly and then class meetings to give students a chance to express their feelings of anger and frustration. Then to further help them release their anger, a marshmallow fight was staged. In addition, teachers made themselves available to talk with individual students who needed it, and the school held an early morning traditional prayer service for all students who wished to attend.

V. Other Issues

- In Juneau, AK, the Native Parent Committee is working with particular schools where teachers or administrators are known to have prejudicial attitudes by identifying the problems they are having with Indian students and discussing them frankly. The committee is compiling records on several schools to take to a school board meeting and looking for other avenues to make schools more accepting and comfortable places for Indian students. They are also using the student outcome goals published by the Alaska Department of Education as a yardstick for working toward school accountability for Indian students.